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# A Fisher-eye lens on social work reform

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## Abstract

- **Summary:** Mark Fisher's *Capitalist Realism*, published in 2009, has been recognised as one of the most important contributions chronicling the rise, application and consequences of neoliberalism. However, Fisher's ideas have until now only garnered passing mention in the study of neoliberalism in children and families social work in England, despite there being extensive research, argument and publication on the subject more broadly. This article attempts to rectify this gap and apply Fisher's theory to the recent reforms in children and families social work in England.
- **Findings:** The article applies Fisher's commentary on the co-option of language, invoking crisis, bureaucracy and proposing change to implement no change, to the reforms in children and families social work that began with the implementation of *Reclaiming Social Work* in 2008. Since that time, the original architects of *Reclaiming Social Work* have gained significant positions of power and influence and been instrumental in introducing neoliberal reforms throughout children and families social work in England.
- **Applications:** Through applying the approach and concepts of Mark Fisher, this article concludes that it is possible to determine that the current reforms are, at their core, neoliberal in nature and driven by an ideological imperative to transform children and

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families social work in England into a neoliberal edifice, with less public sector and state input and oversight and an increase in the influence of 'not-for-profits', charities and international for-profit consultancies.

### Keywords

Social work, England, Mark Fisher, capitalist realism, neoliberalism, neoliberal reform

## Introducing Mark Fisher

Mark Fisher is arguably one of the most original and influential thinkers on late capitalist society, the education sector and British culture in recent times (Arcand, 2018; Garrett, 2018a; Garrett & Conneely, 2015; Withers, 2019). Through his most influential work, *Capitalist Realism* (Fisher, 2009), he provides an in-depth analysis of neoliberalism, its essential contradictions and how neoliberalism 'seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable' (p. 8), making other alternatives impossible to imagine. Now over ten years old, *Capitalist Realism* is a seminal text on the subject of the impact of neoliberalism in the UK. It provides an original perspective on how neoliberal colonisation occurs. Fisher provides a uniquely British critique of neoliberalism, the techniques of its propagation and the inherent contradictions and ill effects this can cause. Given the centrality of his book to the main arguments in this article, all references to Fisher hereafter should be taken as referring to *Capitalist Realism* (Fisher, 2009) unless otherwise stated.

Fisher provides an important lens through which to view the developments in children and families social work in England since the introduction of the first of the current wave of neoliberal reforms, Reclaiming Social Work, 12 years ago (Rix, 2011). The focus of this article will be on reforms in children and families social work in England. Other nations of the UK continue with their own distinct systems of social work that have not experienced neoliberal reforms to the same extent as England. For example, the controversial social work training organisation, Frontline, and Reclaiming Social Work (both discussed in more detail below) are so far not present in Scotland or Northern Ireland. The relevance of Fisher to children and families social work in England has received relatively little attention up to this point, usually consisting of a passing reference to his concept of capitalist realism (Ferguson, 2017; Garrett, 2018b; Singh, 2013). Therefore, this article provides a unique contribution, through engaging in depth with the work of Fisher and looking at how this applies to contemporary children's social work, within an English context.

Several authors, including Garrett (2018a, 2018b), Jones (2015, 2019), Mearns (2014) and Tunstill (2019), have pointed to trends of neoliberalisation and privatisation of children and families social work in England, and the existential threat to social work this entails. Although these concerns have stretched back almost as

far as the profession has existed (Ferguson, 2008), they appear to have intensified since 2010 and the coalition government (Jones, 2015, 2019; Tunstill, 2019). Absent from recent reforms is any acknowledgement of an ideological imperative. This clearly indicates that we are dealing with what Fisher identifies as the deepest and most pervasive of ideological projects: that of neoliberalism, which pervades exactly by ignoring or denying any ideology. With the increasing influence of consultancies, intensified privatisation, the dismantling of established children's services and a narrowing of the theoretical base of children and families social work in England, it seems the profession needs to challenge neoliberal colonisation afresh (Garrett, 2018a, 2018b; Jones, 2019; Tunstill, 2019). This article will argue that the value of Fisher's ideas to social work is in their addition of a new perspective on recent reforms. It does not seek to revisit or dismiss previous arguments about the neoliberalisation of social work, but to point to issues that may continue and intensify if this trend is left unchecked. This discussion will take place through looking at four key areas: the co-option of language; invoking crisis; bureaucracy; and proposing *change* to implement *no change*.

## Co-option of language and ambivalence

Fisher identifies that neoliberal reforms often co-opt the language of resistance to describe or implement reforms. He states that this appears almost all-pervasive in neoliberalism. The more pernicious a company's business ethics, the more the language of resistance is used. Oil companies selling themselves as environmentally friendly is one example Fisher gives of this. He identifies two main purposes for this adoption of the language of resistance. The first is to colonise and nullify the symbolism of resistance itself. The second, which we will come to later, is to harness the emotional and diversionary power of hauntology (Derrida, 1994).

Fisher agrees with Lacan (1981) that language and words have no inherent concrete meaning but are the gateway to a myriad of meanings and symbolism that can be hijacked for other purposes. The repurposing of words disrupts their symbolism, but does not completely eclipse it, allowing the symbolism associated with protest to be used to nullify and disrupt protest (Lacan, 2006). The point has been made elsewhere that neoliberalism colonises language in this way, leaving the old symbolism in place but overpowering it with a new meaning (Garrett, 2012; Higgins & Goodyer, 2014). The use of the terms 'radical' or 'revolutionary' conjures up all the romanticism of the determined idealist fighting for significant change but, as we will see below, this symbolism is invoked whilst simply describing a reiteration of the establishment approach. Neoliberalism, by doing this, takes the role of the establishment *and* the opposition by using both of their languages simultaneously (Garrett, 2012).

Fisher points to the work of Lyotard (1979), who postulated that the postmodern age was characterised not by the loss of meaning but by its fragmentation into many different languages, each with their own exclusive meaning and symbolism. It is through the language of protest, therefore, that protest derives its very power

and meaning. It is not the words themselves that are different but the particular fashion or context in which they are used that gives them meaning or symbolism, and this stays particular to the group who were defined by this language. Fisher, however, goes on to contend that language is in fact not as isolated and insularly defensible as Lyotard (1979) suggests. Fisher proposes that, although the veneer of language having only one meaning is maintained, the language itself is in fact appropriable and open to extensive repurposing. The appropriated language can then be used almost verbatim, introducing confusion, disturbance and uncertainty into that language's symbolism and meaning, and preventing those trying to use language to convey its original meaning from doing so. Fisher shows how neoliberalism's denial of dogmas and ideology allows it to successfully co-opt the language of protest. A lack of defined ideology allows neoliberalism to trumpet its illusory inclusivity to all people, all beliefs – to cast itself as 'for' many different, even contradictory, things at the same time.

Spicer et al. (2019) outline how the co-option of the language of resistance is a regular feature of social entrepreneurs, a group that has become increasingly prominent in social work in England through organisations such as Frontline. Ostensibly a fast-track training provider for social work, Frontline has recently committed to the goal of changing the entire child protection social work system in England through *A Blueprint for Children's Social Care* (hereafter the Blueprint; MacAlister et al., 2019). Spicer et al. (2019) describe how social entrepreneurs like Josh MacAlister, the CEO and founder of Frontline, create legitimacy for themselves and their projects by borrowing discourses and practices from existing community or political fields and marrying these to market logic, thereby disempowering traditional protest movements. Through this strategy, Fisher identifies that neoliberalism can recast any and all protest as simply evidence that privatisation and neoliberalism has not gone far enough. This robs the protester of any semblance of understanding of what they are in fact protesting for, leaving them with little choice but, whether consciously or unconsciously, to ally themselves with neoliberal social entrepreneurs and leaders – the very people and organisations they were previously protesting against.

In the Blueprint, this co-option of language is most notable in the co-opting of the term 'radical' as it relates to social work, which is used nine times in the text, including calling for a "radical change" and a "radical shift" (MacAlister et al., 2019). However, unlike traditional conceptions of radical social work (Pease, 2013), the approach advocated in the Blueprint does not propose radical change to key power structures and systems, preferring instead a model that fits well within existing policy-making around social work in England, a model that has continuously marginalised the voices of social workers and service users while solidifying the power of a few powerful organisations and individuals (Jones, 2019; Tunstill, 2019). By using 'radical' so prominently, the authors of the Blueprint are unmistakably co-opting the language of protest in justifying their proposal (MacAlister et al., 2019). A social worker who would now describe themselves as 'radical' must first engage, whether in sympathy or opposition, with the

Blueprint. The Blueprint (MacAlister et al., 2019) has positioned itself as the ‘radical’ alternative to current social work practice and in the process attempted to render the term ‘radical’, in the context of social work, opaque and stripped of all previous meaning.

Reclaiming Social Work is potentially an even starker example of this co-option of language. Reclaiming Social Work was a redesign of children’s services in the London Borough of Hackney in 2008 which included an extensive firing and rehiring programme, a demand for a strict adherence to systemic practice and systems theory underpinning practice, and the creation of Morning Lane Associates to develop and spread these ideas (Parkes, 2019; Rix, 2011). Since then, and up to its closure in 2019, Morning Lane Associates, a for-profit consultancy previously co-owned by the Chief Social Worker for England Isabelle Trowler, has garnered lucrative local and central government contracts to the tune of at least £2.6 million (Parkes, 2019). Trowler and Goodman’s book is titled *Social Work Reclaimed*, but the proposed reforms are referred to in every other instance as “Reclaiming Social Work” (Trowler & Goodman, 2012). However, *Reclaiming Social Work* is in fact a book by a social work Professor Ian Ferguson published in 2008 which advocates a traditionally radical approach to social work and warns of the dangers of neoliberalism (Ferguson, 2008). This traditionally radical text was engulfed when Trowler and Goodman introduced almost the opposite position under the same name. This took from Ferguson’s work the power of symbolism that *Reclaiming Social Work* had evoked. Now the meaning and impetus of his book must always be differentiated from the higher profile reforms associated with Morning Lane Associates and the Chief Social Worker for England. Further examples of this co-option of language can be seen in the way that the new version of Reclaiming Social Work was marketed using terminology loaded with the symbolic romantic language of resistance. When interviewed, Trowler and Goodman demonstrated this trait directly stating things like: ‘you can follow the rules, but it won’t necessarily help the child’, and ‘people thought we were barmy’ (Rix, 2011).

Another relevant theme raised by Fisher (2012, 2014) relates to the appeal to the emotional and diversionary power of hauntology, something which is also clearly evident in contemporary social work. Although first conceived by Derrida (1994), Fisher defines hauntology in a very different way: as the grieving mankind can individually or collectively engage in due to the loss of a future that never came to pass. Fisher (2012) argues that, in the malaise of the redundancy of ideas and ideology that accompanied the rise of neoliberal society, there was no further possibility for the new, for progress, nor hope for the future. Hope for the future rests upon the idea of the possibility of the new, the possibility of an alternative, and as neoliberalism has no alternative there is no possibility of that. Instead, the neoliberal future is not our future but our parents’ potential futures that were never realised. We can’t move beyond neoliberalism to create something better, but must look to the past, when a version of neoliberalism was never quite implemented, and redress this. This allows for neoliberal reforms to bypass

painstaking argument and trial with little resistance due to the claims of reanimating a future lost, a past ideal on which we all already agree. Neoliberalism's use of hauntology evokes the relief from grief of a loss of hope for the future and replaces this with the safety of realised nostalgia.

The chosen name of Reclaiming Social Work exemplifies Fisher's arguments around hauntology almost perfectly. Trowler and Goodman (2012) use the symbolism of reclamation, playing on the idea of an ideal future previously lost, realised once again only through their reform. This is hauntology incarnate. The terminology of Reclaiming Social Work, such as 'Social Work Reclaimed' also gives the impression not of an active process but of an outcome unachieved, or a symbolically romantic emotional realisation of an unfulfilled dream now fulfilled. It does not say – and of course does not need to say – what this dream is, as it is its very vagueness that makes it powerful. The vaguer the dream, the more widespread its reach, as all recipients will fill in the gap of this romanticism with their own dream and impart onto Reclaiming Social Work that interpretation. In describing their model, Trowler and Goodman can even be seen to evoke the hauntology of Stalin and Mao by referring to "five-year plans" implemented with "military precision" (Rix, 2011). This is hauntology in its most manipulative neoliberal sense: not the haunting of a specific lost future, but the capture of this powerful symbolism to introduce something else.

In this way, Reclaiming Social Work was, in 2008, able to implement brutal changes which would have been unthinkable had they been presented as the new and untested ideas that they actually were (Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2011). The neoliberal hallmark of devaluing the workforce was realised in mass redundancy and rehiring practices (Rix, 2011). This was further demonstrated by the absolute demand of intellectual belief in systemic practice, which goes against the common consensus that social work requires a wide and diverse theoretical base (Payne, 2014; Sudbery & Whitaker, 2019). Reclaiming Social Work was, in essence, an unprecedented top-down reorganisation of the structures and theory base of the profession (Trowler & Goodman, 2012). It is by their use of co-opting radical language and symbolism, and evoking hauntology, Fisher tells us, that we can identify the neoliberal reformer even if they do not cast themselves in this role. Fisher outlines how no other ideology or movement has been able to use this language or tactic in quite this way. What is most concerning are the reforms this enables to be implemented. George Orwell identified the dangers of using language in such a political and imprecise way as 'largely the defence of the indefensible' (Orwell, 2013, p. 13).

## **Invoking crisis**

Both nationally and internationally, scandals of abuse are often seen as the impetus for law or policy change (Halladay & Harrington, 2015). It is no surprise, then, that the major neoliberal reforms of the last 12 years in social work have all been framed in the context of dealing with a crisis (MacAlister et al., 2012, 2019; Narey,



2014; Trowler & Goodman, 2012). Notably, a growing area of concern and potential crisis in social work relates to the social work workforce: recent studies including Holmes et al. (2016), Johnson et al. (2019), Ravalier (2017) and Ravalier and Boichat (2018) identify that the wellbeing, working conditions and morale of social workers have declined in recent years, whilst the number of those wishing or planning to leave the profession has remained high.

However, as Garrett (2019) notes, far from being a problem, these precarious working conditions are actually valuable within the neoliberal project. This could explain why, despite being used regularly as a justification for change and reform – including Reclaiming Social Work, Frontline and the Blueprint – they persist nonetheless. The Blueprint is particularly transparent in the use of this perceived crisis in the social work workforce to perpetuate the neoliberal reform model, including using it to justify rapid introduction and scaling of an untested model of child protection (MacAlister et al., 2019). Fisher provides a clarifying lens, showing how this tactic is regularly employed by neoliberal innovators. The urgency and demand that *not one second must be wasted* providing a rationale to suspend critical evaluation, engagement with other perspectives and pre-emptively heading off arguments for testing and evaluation. This results in the suspension of all ideology, politics or dissent for the sake of expediency: a postmodern variation on Sulla's suspension of the Roman political system until crisis was addressed, obviously in his favour (Caesar, 1951).

The Blueprint cites that there is a vicious cycle in social work, with frustrated social workers leaving, destabilising the workforce and creating a lack of trust, which inevitably leads to the exodus of additional social workers (MacAlister et al., 2019). The Blueprint, however, fails to point out that the existence of this vicious cycle implicates both Reclaiming Social Work, and the Frontline organisation that is behind the Blueprint, as having failed to address the issues identified by their proponents as justification when proposing their previous reforms (MacAlister et al., 2012; Trowler & Goodman, 2012). The Blueprint, Reclaiming Social Work and Frontline all made/make explicit and implicit attacks on the profession, framing current social workers as untrustworthy and incompetent, and making more or less overt threats against their employment (MacAlister et al., 2012, 2019; Trowler & Goodman, 2012). In his description of previous innovators, Russell (1966) gives us an eloquent encapsulation of this anti-humanistic approach: 'though the desire for human welfare is what at bottom determines the broad lines... hatred is far more visible than love' (p. 16).

Central to the proposals within the Blueprint is a requirement for social workers 'with a high bar of confidence and competence' (MacAlister et al., 2019, p. 40). Implementing the Blueprint also requires 'compassionately exiting the social workers who are not good enough to function' (MacAlister et al., 2019, p. 18). As we have seen with Reclaiming Social Work in 2008, these are not idle threats, as Trowler and Goodman made clear: 'many social workers simply lacked the skills required to do the job, both because of the quality of people entering the profession and inadequate training', following this up by acknowledging that,



‘few of Hackney’s original social workers from 2006 got posts in the new system’ (Rix, 2011). This can also be seen in the Frontline organisation, as Tunstill (2019) points out: ‘[Frontline] drew on the idea that child and family social work “tragedies” were rooted solely in the poor calibre of the workforce’ (p. 65). MacAlister, the lead author for both the Frontline proposal report and the Blueprint continues to use the high profile death of Baby P in 2007 to justify and validate the reforms he is part of, despite this tragedy occurring well over a decade ago (Curtis, 2019; MacAlister et al., 2012).

However, the reality is that crises in social work are more likely to be a result of common and persistent legislative overhauls, changes to regulators, budgetary cuts, restructuring of services and a seemingly endless slew of new frameworks, standards, targets, accreditations and statements, all of which can be seen in fact to be central to the neoliberal changes within social work (Dickens, 2011; Jones, 2014, 2019). As Fisher points out, in neoliberalism, the justification for immediate action to respond to crisis is rarely to respond to an actual crisis but to further the goals of neoliberal reformers and to divest blame from those who could be responsible to those who are clearly not.

## **Bureaucracy**

To aid its claims of validity, the Blueprint emphasises the path it forges towards increasing the amount of time social workers spend in direct work with children and families, including invoking the 80–20 campaign (meaning 80% direct work with service users, 20% administrative functions) that the (British Association of Social Work, 2018) has been running in recent years. Reclaiming Social Work, in its various incarnations, made similar calls for increased direct time working with children and families (Jones, 2015). Again, the work of Fisher provides significant insight into these developments. As he points out, the repetitively made claim that increased marketisation and neoliberalisation lead to a reduction in bureaucracy is fallacy. Instead it leads to what Fisher terms Market Stalinism.

For Fisher, Market Stalinism is a form of invasive, ever-present bureaucracy that presents itself as decentred, coming from no one place in particular or even being self-imposed in nature. Therefore, in neoliberalism, bureaucracy does not diminish, but instead becomes something that is more opaque and omnipresent. What neoliberalism does is strip out the management level that is usually the receiver and enforcer of bureaucratic processes, with the logic following that without the culprit there is no crime (Sennett, 2006). However, this logic does not acknowledge that bureaucracy is rarely if ever imposed by a person, but by systems. Therefore, without managers, the need to feed the system will remain, it simply becomes internally imposed rather than externally imposed. Fisher goes further and proposes that with an external agent, like a manager, in place to direct the bureaucracy and impose definitive criteria of what is expected, boundaries and feedback are available, which help contain what bureaucracy is needed and when. Without this focus it is not clear what is needed, so everything is needed

‘just in case’. Not only does this increase the bureaucratic tasks, whether anyone will receive the fruits of this labour or not; but it also means that, as no definite expectations or feedback are forthcoming, there is no way of knowing if the bureaucracy produced is enough in either volume, scope, frequency or quality. Fisher located this as part of what Deleuze (1992) described as control societies: a self-policing bureaucracy in which all data must be constantly collected by oneself for analysis ‘elsewhere’. The consequences of not doing this are unclear but may be disastrous – a process described by Kafka (2015) in *The Trial* as indefinite postponement.

The new National Assessment and Accreditation System (NAAS), a new model of assessing qualified children and families social workers in England, is an almost textbook example of this process (Department for Education, 2020). There has been no clear indication from the Department for Education or anyone else as to why the NAAS is necessary, or what the consequences of pass, fail or refusal to take the test may be, in any of the specific literature regarding it (Department for Education, 2016, 2020). However, despite this, tens of millions of pounds continue to be spent on the system every year (Labour Social Work Group, 2018; Turner, 2020). Furthermore, the NAAS is not contextualised within the wider changes in the system, including Reclaiming Social Work’s regime of firing and rehiring, the Blueprint’s threats to compassionately exit social workers that are not good enough, and Frontline’s continued emphasis on outstanding individuals being the gold standard for social work, all of which suggest that there may be serious implications of a failure or refusal to comply with this extra bureaucratic process (MacAlister et al., 2012, 2019; Trowler & Goodman, 2012).

Fisher gives the example of a control society where enough is never really enough, satisfactory is no longer satisfactory on staff evaluations, and yet one must still not fall into a trap of lacking self-criticism. Staff are therefore caught in a perpetual bureaucratic cycle that has shifted from periodic to ubiquitous, and from compartmentalised reporting to omnipresent self-auditing. The Blueprint takes particular issue with bureaucracy and cites reduction of bureaucracy as one of its main, unique advantages (MacAlister et al., 2019). It links a managerialism associated with New Labour as the cause for ever-increasing bureaucracy, and then concludes this is a direct cause for limiting, or even diminishing, the profession’s effectiveness and ability to recruit and retain.

The Blueprint, however, does not identify a reduction of paperwork, such as assessments, Ofsted inspections, or court reports, nor a dispensing with statutory expectations (MacAlister et al., 2019). Rather, it proposes that, by removing the management level that is usually responsible for monitoring and quality-assuring work, the bureaucracy that goes with that job description will also be removed. In this context it appears that the role of risk management and risk-holding responsibility, currently held by the middle managerial level, will simply be deputised down to the individual social worker, much as it was to the consultant social worker role under Reclaiming Social Work (Trowler & Goodman, 2012). In critiquing the Reclaiming Social Work model, Jones (2015) mirrors the warnings of

Fisher that this provides less support and an ever-increasing bureaucratic burden on individual social workers for self-policing. Similarly, the Blueprint can be seen to perpetuate this, ultimately leading to a pushing down of blame when things go wrong, or even when they are just not properly reported or monitored, to the individual social worker (MacAlister et al., 2019). Here it can be seen that the Blueprint almost embraces what Deleuze (1992) warns against. A control society dispenses with formal bureaucracy and, in its place, imposes self-policing. In this context, the driver is no longer the manager demanding stats to report up the chain of command, but the anxiety of the worker to record the right thing in the right way. In this way, Fisher suggests that neoliberalism always implies hidden expectations behind official standards.

The impact this will have on children and families social work is therefore easy to conceive. Whereas a manager may collect and demand stats for home visits on a fortnightly or weekly basis, when the stats must be monitored and held by a social worker themselves this will be checked and rechecked on a daily basis. Anyone who did not would be leaving themselves open to being singled out for missing the recording of a visit, and under the Blueprint there would be no manager to shoulder the blame or protect the worker should this happen (MacAlister et al., 2019). This part of the Blueprint has echoes of Foucault's (1979) Panopticon, the instillation of continuous anxiety to internalise compliance. As Foucault observed, eventually the anxiety is so overwhelming and so internalised it doesn't matter if anyone is watching or not.

## **Proposing change to implement no change**

Heraclitus argued the cosmos was in a constant state of change (Wakefield, 2009). However, in one doctoral study of social workers' views of change there was a dissonance between whether there were really changes in social work or instead a circular return, suggesting there was an underlying continuity in the profession (Higgins, 2013). In contrast to notions of change in social work and other professions, Fisher states that imagining the demise of the world is now more feasible than the demise of capitalism. Capitalist realism thereby suggests that capitalism is the only realistic system and alternative models are therefore inconceivable. Thus, the social workers in that doctoral study may have struggled to agree whether there were changes because, under capitalism, change and the hope of change is unimaginable (Higgins, 2013).

Fisher identifies that capitalist realism leads to a sickness that there is nothing new and it may be that the social workers in that study experienced this malaise when they struggled to work out whether there were changes in social work. This illness can result in a loss of hope because no change, no alternative hopeful future, can be imagined (Higgins et al., 2016). From the aforementioned doctoral study (Higgins, 2013) there are two quoted examples of this sense of a loss of hope: 'I think it's just the same thing just sold in a different package basically...' (Academic 1). 'A full circle...' (Academic 2).

The metaphor of change as an illusionary “package” is interesting because it suggests change is a type of commodity or product that can be consumed or picked up as a parcel. The “circle” imagery sees change as a movement that could indicate change but is simply another example of what is really no change by commodifying change as a product. It seems Heraclitus was wrong and Parmenides was right: that there is no change (Wakefield, 2009).

The concept of there being no possibility of change does not assume that forms of anti-capitalism cease to exist. Rather, anti-capitalism can be incorporated into capitalist realism. The title of the Blueprint provides an example of how anti-capitalism can be incorporated into capitalism by using the terms “blueprint”, “unlocking” and “potential” (MacAlister et al., 2019, p. 1). A blueprint is a plan or outline that can produce/reproduce multiple copies of a product, in what is ironically now a redundant process in the face of digital design technology. As discussed above, products are fixed or objectified consumables that are unchanged. In contrast, “unlocking” suggests setting free something that is imprisoned. It is interesting that we are not told what the Blueprint is setting us free from. We are informed only that the “potential” of social work will be let out. Given that we are not told what this means, potential is, in a sense, a sort of empty box waiting to be filled – with exactly what, we do not yet know.

This use and type of rhetoric is a common feature in the language of change (Fairclough, 2000). The following extract from the Blueprint provides insight here:

Providing *inspiration* for this *endeavour* is a *growing global movement* that is taking place in public management and organisational design. *Around the world*, governments and politicians are starting to *advocate* for complexity-conscious management and for devolving more power and autonomy to frontline staff. This contrasts with ‘New Public Management’ approaches, which introduced private sector tools to the public sector and commercialised services by creating silos and adding layers of management. Former proponents of the ‘New Public Management’ approach, such as Tony Blair, now acknowledge its limitations and advocates from both left and right now argue for giving more *freedom and responsibility* to those on the front line of delivering services. (MacAlister et al., 2019, p. 11 – Authors’ own emphasis)

This quotation adopts the language of change, using such terms as “endeavour” and “growing global movement”. The universal reach of change is emphasised by the use of the words “global” and “all around the world”. In a sense, there is no escape from the Blueprint. It is literally everywhere. So encompassing is the proposed change that “both left and right support it”, a statement that can be seen as another example of anti-capitalism being incorporated into capitalism, although we must note the Blueprint is vague on who specifically on the left and right support it.

Dominic Cummings is the Chief Advisor to the current Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Boris Johnson, and credited with having influential roles in the country’s vote to leave the EU and the general election result of 2019

(Collini, 2020). The Blueprint uses (Cummings, 2014) essay to support what its authors call 'more freedom and responsibility to those on the front line of delivering services' (p. 11). However, in his essay Cummings proposed an Odyssean education to challenge and replace existing models of learning. Cummings shares the revolutionary language of the Blueprint; however, the Odyssean model also exhibits the contradictory relationship to change identified earlier. Despite the revolutionary language, Odysseus's travels were a voyage to his home. Therefore, once again, the metaphor of *change as no change* can be identified within this revolutionary language.

This *change as no change* model can also be identified within Fisher's (2014) use of the term hauntology, as identified above. These lost futures were also the loss of hope about (a) better future(s). The Blueprint is an example of a plan for a better social work future. However, as we have argued, under the critical lens of capitalist realism, this new hope is designed to go the way of all new hopes for a better social work profession. Its main functions may rather be to come back to haunt us with dreams of what might have been and to provide the foundations of the next neo-liberal reform.

Promised change leading to no change can be seen as the underlying source of all these lost hopes of what would have, should have, and could have been. In the doctoral study on change referenced above, there is an underlying dilemma about change identified, with the key question being: is change really possible? (Higgins, 2013). There was a sense of helplessness from some of the participants that the future they hoped for was not to be. This is what Fisher (2014) means by hauntology. These participants are haunted by what social work could have been. In an ideal world, the Blueprint could offer an improved social work practice. Our analysis suggests the Blueprint is likely – possibly even designed – to become yet another ghost of a lost future.

## Limitations

While this article engages with primary research, no primary research was undertaken in the writing of this article, meaning that the ideas being proposed could not be verified. However, it is important to recognise that the conceptual nature of this article would not usually be expected to include primary data collection in this way. It is also important to recognise that there is vast literature on neoliberalism, including neoliberalism in social work, and this work only draws on some of this. Therefore, some important relevant texts may not be discussed here, but could still feed into this discussion and debate.

## Conclusion

There is a long history of concerns voiced regarding the encroachment of neoliberalism into children and families social work in England, and most have cited the reforms in the last 13 years as an acceleration of this process (Ferguson, 2008;

Garrett, 2018a, 2018b; Jones, 2015, 2019; Tunstill, 2019). There has however been no serious attempt to apply the ideas and work of Mark Fisher, especially his most influential work, *Capitalist Realism*, to these reforms. In this article we have demonstrated the power of Fisher's analysis to see the tactics and outcomes of these neoliberal reforms. Fisher shows us that the use of language is of paramount importance in how these reforms are justified and implemented, but also in how we can analyse, understand and ultimately critique them. The call to arms implicit in the use of the language of protest and crisis prevents proper assessment and criticism of these models. This in turn allows for their adoption in their most excessive and brutal forms, untested and without any evidence they may work, except for the conceptual argument they put forward (MacAlister et al., 2019; Rix, 2011).

Fisher also allows us to see that, behind the mask of revolutionary language, responding to crisis and ushering in emancipatory change the usual tropes of neoliberal reform are ever-present. The railing against bureaucracy which ultimately leads to more bureaucracy, the blind faith in the social entrepreneur and the consultancy, and the focussing on standards as a cover to devalue and destabilise the workforce are present in all these reforms. As Russell (1966) warned, and Camus (2000) expanded on, it is this language of protest coupled with an ingrained anti-humanism that leads inevitably to the gulag and the concentration camp. Ultimately, Fisher reveals these reforms do not in fact bring about change, but – through the use of neoliberal hauntology, embedding neoliberal rather than other reforms as the longed-for lost possibilities, and colonising all possible alternatives – they simply push the reach of neoliberalism ever deeper. These reforms, couched as rebellions are entirely false: neoliberalism is already with us, and it is the pantomime of reform within these narrow neoliberal circles which ultimately prevents any real, meaningful reform or change occurring.

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## Ethics

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